

Student Teachers' Reflections on Service and Learning in Navajo Reservation Communities: Contextualizing the Classroom Experience

Laura L. Stachowski and Christopher J. Frey

Abstract

This report reviews service learning activities performed by student teachers in the American Indian Reservation Project in their placement communities across the Navajo Nation. Parameters for this required, academic assignment included the selection of activities independent of their schools' academic or extracurricular programs; completion of activities with supporting Navajo community members; and adherence to the "three R's:" *realistic* tasks serving the community, a strong *reflective* component, and *reciprocal exchange* between equals. Many varying service-learning projects were performed. The student teachers' insightful written reports described important outcomes in terms of new knowledge acquired, a deeper appreciation for the circumstances of others' lives, and greater acceptance in their placement communities. Knowledge of the community and its people, including their backgrounds, beliefs, traditions, and values, contributes to the creation of a classroom context in which teachers can more effectively serve their elementary and secondary pupils.

Key Words: service learning, student teaching, teacher education, American Indian education

Introduction

Most educators today would agree that teaching does not occur in a vacuum, recognizing that classrooms, school buildings, and the immediate school

community are integral parts of the broader communities in which they are located. The relationship of schools and the community is dynamic, with the ways in which schools are perceived and operated reflected in the interests and needs of the community. Brown and Kysilka (2002) observed, "Changing demographics, increased interaction among cultural groups, the interconnectedness and interdependence of all participants in the local and the global village—these concerns and many others are part of everyday life in even the most isolated U.S. community" (p. 183). Responsible educators seek to understand these dynamics, using their knowledge of the community's cultural and social patterns to better meet the needs of the youth in their elementary and secondary classrooms (Brown & Kysilka; Ramírez & Gallardo, 2001). However, simply studying the community is not enough. Brown and Kysilka advised that teachers must become actively involved in the communities of which their schools are a part, "contributing to the community as a concerned citizen." They added:

Meeting local leaders and attending local events is one way to get involved. Another way is to become active in community projects or organizations as a volunteer. For preservice teachers, such volunteering provides valuable community background information not available through the typical classroom field experiences. (p. 185)

The involvement of teachers in the communities served by their schools becomes even more significant in situations where the school and community may have different agendas and value systems, as Rhodes (1994) suggested is the case on some American Indian Reservations. Citing examples from both Hopi and Navajo communities, Rhodes recommended that teachers "need to get out into the community as often as possible and in as many roles as possible" (p. 186), adding that teachers need to know the environment in which their American Indian pupils live. Similarly, Gilliland (1995) voiced concern that "teachers are often not aware of the seriousness of the problems children have in being Indian in the non-Indian world of the school, problems rooted in the difference in cultures" (p. 17). Echoing Rhodes, Gilliland advised teachers to "visit with the people in the community at every opportunity. Let them see that you respect them and their culture, that you are interested in other things in the community besides the school" (p. 22). Gilliland believed that if teachers participated actively in community organizations and tribal activities, they would build the respect of community members who, in turn, would support the school and encourage their children to do their best.

Participants in an American Indian Reservation student teaching project have sought to implement these suggestions through active participation in both their placement schools and communities across the Navajo Indian

Reservations in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Because of requirements that Navajo communities and community members become important sources of learning, student teachers have reflected on their understanding of Navajo culture, changes occurring in Navajo society, and the everyday struggles Navajo people face. In turn, these insights have helped student teachers to apply their classroom experiences to the larger community context and to incorporate local issues into classroom instruction (Stachowski & Frey, 2003; Stachowski, Richardson, & Henderson, 2003). The current report focuses specifically on required, community-based, service-oriented learning activities performed by recent student teachers on the Navajo Reservation, paralleling an earlier article describing the impact of service learning in communities abroad (Stachowski & Visconti, 1998). The outcomes strongly support Rhodes' (1994) and Gilliland's (1995) assertions that knowledge of the community and the people who live there, including their backgrounds, beliefs, traditions, and values, creates a context in which teachers can better serve elementary and secondary pupils.

The American Indian Reservation Project

The American Indian Reservation Project at Indiana University-Bloomington is one of two Cultural Immersion Projects started in the early 1970s as an optional alternative to conventional student teaching. Through the Reservation Project, student teachers are prepared and placed for sixteen-week teaching assignments in Bureau of Indian Affairs, contract/grant, and public schools across the Navajo Nation (Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah). Cultural and community involvement are cornerstone components throughout the immersion experience.

During the academic year prior to student teaching, Project participants are required to undergo extensive preparation (including seminars, readings, workshops, and sessions with Navajo consultants) for the cultural values, beliefs, lifestyles, and education practices in the placement sites for which they have applied. These preparatory activities are completed *in addition to* the students' regular course requirements in their teacher education programs. One preparatory assignment engages each Project participant in a structured "interview exam" over Fedullo's (1992) *Light of the Feather*. With a Reservation Project coordinator, the student examines Fedullo's journey into "contemporary Indian America" through a discussion of issues surrounding culture shock, stereotypes, verbal and nonverbal communication patterns, assimilation and acculturation, educational practices, and American Indian values. Taken together, these requirements not only familiarize the student teachers with the schools and culture in which they will be expected to operate, but they also

serve as an effective self-screening device in that applicants whose primary motivation may be to “see the Southwest” are discouraged by the intensive preparatory work. The preparatory phase receives ongoing review and evaluation by the Project director and staff, and feedback from Project participants is utilized in revising assignments to better fit the students’ preparatory needs.

While at their Reservation sites, Project participants are placed with supervising classroom teachers and expected to engage fully in all teacher-related functions of their host schools, including classroom instruction, pupil supervision, committee participation, meeting attendance, and extracurricular involvement. Participants live in the placement school’s dormitory and provide after-school academic tutoring, companionship, role modeling, and “life enhancement” activities for the young Navajo dorm residents. They also assist in preparing and serving breakfast and dinner in the school cafeteria. Such dormitory and cafeteria experiences enable the student teachers to interact closely with people at the grassroots level in a wide range of activities—from the ordinary tasks of daily life to special events and traditional ceremonies—and thus learn first-hand about the people and communities in which their pupils live.

Contact is maintained with the Reservation Project office throughout the on-site experience by telephone and correspondence. Staff members write detailed feedback letters to participants upon receiving their assignments and reports, and calls are placed when concerns arise or points require clarification. The Project director visits each participant on-site at the beginning of the semester, and midway through a staff member returns to troubleshoot with those student teachers who need the extra support and to conduct a daylong seminar for the entire group at a centrally located school. School personnel, usually administrators or department heads, are designated as external supervisors, who observe, provide feedback, and serve as resources should questions or problems arise at any time in the semester. Further, all Reservation Project participants know that the university office is a phone call away should questions arise, and with few exceptions, e-mail enables the student teachers to maintain contact with Project staff as often as needed and receive feedback on their academic assignments within a few days of submitting them electronically.

The Reservation Project and its academic components are designed to emphasize *both* classroom teaching and community involvement experiences. Project participants cannot “just student teach” but also must immerse themselves into the lives and culture of the people with whom they live and work. Consequently, members of the placement community, along with educators and supervisors in the placement school, become (on many levels) vital contributors to the learning of student teachers. Some of these learning outcomes and their sources are examined in Stachowski and Mahan (1998).

School and Community on the Navajo Reservation

In many American Indian Reservation communities, especially on the Navajo Reservation, the sometimes difficult relationships between community and school often reflect historical, cultural, linguistic, religious, and economic differences. These differences are amplified by the unique role of the school in most rural Navajo communities as the largest and often sole employer in many small communities, and the largest category of employment on the Navajo Reservation (Roessel, 2003).

The spread of schools across the Navajo Reservation has also changed the nature of Navajo community. In McCarty's (1994) description of Rough Rock, the construction of trading posts and schools contributed to a sense of community in Rough Rock, built around Western institutions, where one had not existed before. McCarty's description of the central role of the school in the creation of a "community" suggested that the relationships between the scattered families of the area intensified over time, but also led to the creation (both physically and socially) of a new community centered on the school.

Between these older "traditional" communities and the newer, "school communities," disagreements and distance can develop over many issues. In many communities where jobs are scarce, the array of teaching, support, and administrative work at the school is the only option for local residents, creating competition for often scarce positions. Politically, the schools can be complex sites of contention about curriculum, language policy, family politics, and leadership. Despite the strong presence of the school in many communities, the traditional community is often far removed from the school. Further, despite overtures from the schools and from the traditional communities, the gap is often very difficult to bridge. One result is that non-Navajo are often left without firsthand knowledge of the traditional, non-school community, and thus of the home life of their students and co-workers. Because of the required service learning project, student teachers are often able to make the first, tentative steps across the school-community divide.

The Service Learning Requirement

One of the more popular on-site requirements in the American Indian Reservation Project is the service learning activity, which is a critical component of students' on-site academic work. Student teachers must participate in a minimum of four hours of planned work activity and generate a written report, including both narrative and reflective sections. In the narrative section, student teachers are asked to clearly describe the nature of the activity, how it was planned, who participated and in what capacity, and what was accomplished.

In the second half of the report, student teachers reflect on what they learned about the people with whom they worked, the host community in general, and how these lessons influence their understanding of their students and the school community.

Parameters for this assignment include the selection of learning activities independent of the placement school's academic and/or extracurricular program; the completion of activities with supporting Navajo community members and/or agencies that are part of the placement community; and adherence to the "three R's" in that their chosen activities should represent *realistic* tasks that serve the community, the activities should include a strong *reflective* component whereby the participants extend the learning derived from the experience, and the activities should be based on the premise of *reciprocal exchange* between equals. Each Reservation Project participant must complete at least one service learning activity by the midway point of the on-site experience, although a second service learning activity is one of several options from which participants can choose for their final project at the end of their student teaching.

The student teachers' write-ups of their service-learning activities are typically candid, insightful, and inspiring. They describe the procedures they followed to organize the activities and the events surrounding the actual performance of the activities; further, they evaluate their success in terms of personal learning, services rendered to others, the reciprocity of the relationship, and things they might have done differently. Many student teachers also remark in their write-ups that community people look favorably upon their involvement in service learning activities, recognizing the students' commitment to their Reservation communities and purposes for being there. These activities and outcomes, reported by the student teachers and drawing on their own words, are the focus of the following sections.

The Service Learning Activities

In the current report, 39 student teachers in recent semesters completed a total of 53 service learning projects. A great variety of projects were performed and included the more common activities such as volunteering at community fundraisers and helping to herd sheep, as well as more unique opportunities such as preparing and serving food at traditional healing ceremonies and helping to build a sweat lodge or repair a hogan. The range of projects completed is identified in Table 1. (Note: all names used in this article are pseudonyms.)

The student teachers relied on a great many people in their Reservation communities to facilitate their involvement in these service learning activities and to serve as sources of learning and insight while they worked side-by-side in achieving shared goals. For some student teachers, their supervising

Table 1. Service Learning Activities Completed by Student Teachers

<p><u>Family-Based</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • herded sheep, goats, and cattle • cleaned, exercised, fed, groomed horses • helped dismantle and repair a roof • hauled water for livestock • surveyed the land (checked condition of livestock, studied plant growth) • assisted a local artist in collecting natural red clay and pine pitch for traditional pottery • helped a family prepare for a traditional sweat ceremony • provided companionship and assistance to a woman experiencing a family crisis • gathered, chopped wood • prepared food for a meeting of the Native American Church, cleaned up, supervised young children • helped repair a family's hogan • helped a family prepare for a Blessingway ceremony • decorated, prepared, and served food at a Hawaiian-themed birthday party • helped with meal preparation and clean-up in a family's home • helped collect and haul 80 bales of hay to an elderly woman who lives alone • helped build a fence • cleaned out a shed for an elderly woman • assisted a family with farm chores (used a tractor to compress horse manure, fed livestock) • assisted with chores in preparation for a shoe game <p><u>Community-Based</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decorated hall, prepared and served food at a Valentine's Day spaghetti dinner to raise money for the first-grade end-of-year field trip • prepared and served food at funeral reception for beloved community member • prepared and served a Thanksgiving lunch in school cafeteria to hundreds of community people • with dorm pupils, organized a community clean-up for Earth Day • helped with Thanksgiving dinner preparation, food and blanket distribution to the homeless in a community off the Reservation • prepared and served food, cleaned up at banquet for prevention of child abuse • assisted at a powwow (stamping hands, selling raffle tickets) • helped at community fundraiser, made and sold fry bread and Navajo tacos • assisted with a youth group at a local church

classroom teachers, other teachers in the school building, teacher aides, or school secretaries suggested possible service learning projects. These opportunities were oftentimes within their own families, for example, when the student teachers were asked to help with caring for livestock or to assist with preparations for special events. In other cases, staff in the dormitory and cafeteria, bus drivers, and other personnel on the school campus facilitated the student teachers' involvement in various family-based and community-based activities. In a few cases, the student teachers connected with community members not

directly involved with the school through their interactions at the local chapter house (government building) or trading post.

Student teachers' descriptions of the events surrounding the actual performance of their activities were revealing, sensitive, and occasionally humorous, as these novice educators stepped from the familiar world of school classrooms into Navajo families' homes and communities to contribute in meaningful ways, while learning from their hosts about the things that matter in their lives. For many student teachers, herding sheep is something they hope to do while they are on the Reservation, yet they seldom have anticipated the skill and patience required to herd sheep effectively. Sandy described the anxiety she and her placement partner, Carol, felt upon facing the flock they were to herd:

There were 16 sheep and 4 goats. We were both very nervous to be left with the responsibility of so many living animals, and we spent a lot of time going over the directions with Frances [a woman who worked in the dormitory where Sandy and Carol lived and to whom these animals belonged]. We were so worried about the details, but Frances was not giving us straight answers. She would just say, "just turn around when you get over there," and then pursed her lips to point in the direction from whence we came. All right, we said nervously, but it was not too long before we learned who was really herding the sheep. Frances had four dogs that stayed with the sheep, and they were the real ones in charge. I tried to feel like I was doing something, but when I strategically moved over to one side to try to direct the sheep in the opposite direction, I soon found that one of the dogs had done the same thing a few minutes before me.

Gary, too, was challenged by herding cattle belonging to his classroom teacher, Tanya, reporting that the reality was vastly different from that depicted in Hollywood westerns:

While herding the cattle, I felt like Billy Crystal in "City Slickers," although herding cattle is completely different from how Hollywood represents it on a movie screen. Herding cattle is an extremely slow process with a lot of technique. Tanya taught me that the smoother you herd the cows the more successful the task will be. She explained that you have to herd the cows slow, so they do not burn out on you. The more you push them, the more stubborn they become. You do not whip them to keep them going as seen in a John Wayne movie. Instead, using a trained dog to round the herd up is most successful.

Oftentimes, student teachers discovered a role reversal, with children from the school being the ones to show them how such tasks are accomplished. This

was the case for Beth and Annie, who were invited by a teacher aide to her home to help with the sheep and prepare a meal:

Without Emma saying much, we knew her fifth grade nephew would be our supervisor and teacher. For the next two hours we experienced herding sheep in the desert of Arizona, for the first time in our lives. We saw sheep and goats under our care who responded quickly to our slightest movements. We also saw how unconcerned Nate was that the herd seemed to be so spread out. This made me feel a little nervous because I felt like we didn't have control over the herd. I heard the bell collars ring and the sheep and goats talk to themselves and each other, and I thought, "do nearby coyotes hear them too? What do we do if one comes? Does Nate know what he's doing?" I was nervous. Nervous for the sheep, for Nate, and for us. Clearly I was out of my comfort zone.

Later on, Beth, Annie, and Nate returned to Emma's home to prepare dinner on the grill in the family's yard. For this, Emma assumed the role of teacher and supervisor, demonstrating how to form the dough they had mixed into tortillas. Beth sought to capture this special moment: "It was a wonderful feeling to be outside at dusk, making tortillas and fry bread with our Navajo friends, laughing, smelling the wafting smoke from the pungent burning juniper wood, and listening to their stories in Navajo and English."

While many of the service learning projects selected by student teachers fulfilled personal dreams they had held for their Reservation experiences, others arose suddenly and without warning, and were sometimes linked to tragic circumstances for members of the community. Carol, for example, was asked to assist in preparing for a traditional Navajo sweat, which she was then invited to participate in. "Robert was intent on having a sweat on this particular weekend," she explained, "because he wanted to pray for the missing soldier from [this place] whom he had known since childhood." Julie and Miranda, upon discovering that the daughter of a teacher aide at school had attempted suicide the night before, spent an evening at their colleague's home, bringing food for her many dogs, hauling water, preparing a fried chicken dinner, and offering companionship. Similarly, Maggie and Rachel assisted in preparing and serving food at a funeral reception held in the school cafeteria for one of the school's bus drivers who had died unexpectedly. Rachel described how she and Maggie reported to the kitchen at 11:30 a.m., as they had been instructed to do, and asked what they could do to help. After being passed from one person to the next, they were told to sit and wait until 1:00 p.m. when they would be needed to serve. "So minutes after arriving," Rachel wrote, "we found ourselves sitting in two miniature chairs designed for six-year-olds, having nothing to

do. Maggie and I felt out of place, somewhat rejected, and awkward.” Maggie, too, described the initial discomfort of the experience:

I felt out of my comfort zone because I did not know anyone, and they were all speaking in Navajo. I felt like an intruder because I really did not know Mr. Charley and did not feel comfortable mourning his loss. However, once I swallowed my insecurities and asked someone for guidance, finding a job to do was very easy. I began to feel embraced by strangers and started building new friendships. It was a good feeling to know that we all had one thing in common, a desire to help.

Undoubtedly, these experiences affected the personal and professional lives of the student teachers, and upon reflection, the student teachers themselves determined what they gained through their participation in service learning projects and the importance of these outcomes.

Student Teachers’ Reflections Upon Service Learning in Their Reservation Communities

Reflection is an integral component of service learning, for without it, the experience is simply an exercise without meaning. Silcox (1993) described reflection as “the process of looking back on the implications of action taken—both good and bad—determining what has been gained, lost, or achieved, and connecting these conclusions to future actions and larger societal contexts” (p. 102). Indeed, in reflecting on their service learning projects, the student teachers overwhelmingly reported that these were eye-opening experiences, resulting in the following common themes:

- acquisition of new knowledge about Navajo culture and society—things that are not learned in classrooms and books,
- a deeper appreciation for the circumstances of other people’s lives, including a better understanding of the pupils in their classrooms and colleagues in the school,
- greater acceptance in their placement communities,
- new insights of a personal nature, and,
- a renewed vision of their role in the Reservation.

Acquisition of New Knowledge

That student teachers acquire new knowledge is an expected outcome of the service learning requirement, as they engage closely with Navajo community members—adults and youth alike—in the completion of shared goals. Whether through general conversation, direct instruction, or careful observation, the

student teachers reflected on significant new learning about Navajo values, beliefs, and traditions, as well as issues impacting contemporary Navajo society. Leana, for example, reflected on all she had learned through her assistance and participation in a Blessingway, a traditional ceremony performed for a person's general well-being. The ceremony was for one of the dorm staff, with whom she had forged a special bond. "Learning about a people, their culture, and traditions firsthand has been the experience of a lifetime," Leana wrote. "It cannot be read in a book or taught in a classroom." Like Leana, many of the student teachers appreciated that they were the recipients of the gift of knowledge, given by the Navajo people with whom they lived, worked, and served. Carol learned much about the symbolism of the sweat lodge through assisting Robert in its construction. As they secured heavy tarps over supporting poles, ensuring no light could penetrate to the inside, Robert explained that the absolute darkness is required to recreate the darkness we experienced in the womb. "We were told to always crawl inside the sweat lodge," Carol reflected, "and never to stand or walk."

Gary, too, in assisting his classroom teacher (Tanya) and her husband with the chores on their ranch, learned how to determine whether the cattle were dehydrated, underfed, or wounded, and how to study plant growth to distinguish where the best grazing land was located and where it would be found in the weeks ahead. He was humbled by Tanya's husband's willingness to share his philosophies throughout the day. For example, he explained to Gary, "I don't own the land; it owns me. The land is alive and spreads its spirit to the people," and he later suggested that two hawks gliding overhead were their ancestors watching over them.

In reflecting on her service at the funeral reception for the school's beloved bus driver, Maggie learned about the differences between Christian funerals and traditional Navajo ceremonies. The women working with her in the kitchen explained that when someone dies, the area where the person died must be purified. Since Mr. Charley had died on his bus, one of the facility workers who is a medicine man cleansed the bus before the Bureau of Indian Affairs took it. "He cleansed the area so that Mr. Charley's spirit would not be trapped there," Maggie wrote. "During the cleansing, he lit a fire in the school hogan and placed food and water inside it for Mr. Charley's spirit during its journey into the next world." Maggie also learned "that it is custom in traditional Navajo culture to never speak the name of the dead, as this helps keep their spirit at peace and avoid its being trapped." Unaware of this practice, a fellow cafeteria worker brought it to Maggie's attention, for which she was thankful: "I made sure I was conscious of my speech throughout the reception."

Deeper Appreciation for the Circumstances of Other People's Lives

Hand-in-hand with the acquisition of new knowledge often comes a deeper appreciation for the nature of other people's lives. In particular, the student teachers are struck to discover so much about the pupils in their classes by spending time with them and their families through the service learning projects. Annie, for example, developed a new appreciation for Nate, the fifth-grader in her class, following her adventures in shepherding. She reflected:

When Beth and I went to Emma's and I got the chance to see Nate in his environment, doing all his chores, I felt like I respected him more, cared about him more, understood him more. I realized he didn't go home every day and lounge in front of the TV, like I did when I was his age. Instead, he chopped wood or herded sheep, or he did another job that needed to be accomplished. That is far more than I can say when I was 12. I remember being selfish and lazy, to be quite honest, when I was that age. But watching Nate with his mother, grandma, and brother, I realized his responsibilities were those of a man. Knowing his life is probably not always easy, I feel as if I'm more understanding when he comes to school tired or even in a grumpy mood. He has added responsibilities to his homework load, and I can't imagine how a growing 12-year-old handles this type of load.

Similarly, Jen, who spent a Saturday helping a local family clean out the horse corral, haul water for the horses, and groom them, better understood what her pupils experience on their weekends and generally what life is like for them outside of school. "When I would ask them about their weekend," she reflected, "they would often tell me that they hauled water and wood, and rode their horses. Up until now, I could not imagine what that experience was like for them. It gave me a greater appreciation for the family structure and way of life here." Like Annie, Jen was used to children complaining when asked to help, and seeing these Navajo children contribute in such significant ways took her by surprise. "Was this due to the fact that there is really nothing else to do in town?" she wondered. "Or are family values really encouraged and practiced that much? I'm hoping for the latter."

In addition to better understanding how hard some of their pupils must work outside of school, other student teachers reported having a new appreciation for the significance of traditional ceremonies and milestone events in the lives of young Navajo people. Tom, for example, reflected on his own expectations in the classroom, following his involvement with a Blessingway ceremony in his placement community:

I'm more understanding of students that are gone for so many days.

Many of these students are having their puberty ceremonies performed. Puberty is a sensitive subject with any student, but to explain it to the teacher can be even more difficult. I was never mean, but I may have pushed too hard for explanations. I am more sensitive in recognizing that not all students want to talk about it. And I am more conscious of the right to privacy, and respectful of their lifestyles and traditions.

For several student teachers, the insights they gained reflected the difficult circumstances of some of the children in their classes, where families dealt with issues of alcoholism, suicide, abuse, and extreme poverty. Meg's service learning project took place on Thanksgiving Day, when she accompanied a group to an off-Reservation community where they served dinners and distributed blankets to the homeless. On their way back to the Reservation, they stopped at a trailer where one of Meg's pupils lived with six siblings, under the care of their grandmother. The Navajo woman in charge was concerned that there would be no food in the house, which was indeed the case. Meg wrote:

This whole experience really helped illustrate to me the type of environment many of our students come from. We've ridden the bus with them three or four times now, and we've seen their houses, but you don't realize how little they have until you figure out that they have no food. Once again, I have realized how much I have taken for granted in my life.

Along with new insight into the daily experience of the children in their classes, the student teachers reflected on the lives of the adults with whom they interacted daily—those teachers, dorm and cafeteria staff, and other community members for whom the Reservation is a constant. Something as basic as sheepherding provided a multitude of lessons for Beth:

When I look back at our experience, I am so grateful for what I learned and will cherish in my memory for as long as I live. I've never felt or assumed that the Navajo way of life is simple or easy to understand, being an outsider, but I've had thoughts like, "how hard can it really be to herd sheep?" I was so humbled by my first experience with herding. I saw Emma's elderly mother sitting on a rock in the middle of the herd when we arrived. As soon as Annie and I were left with Nate and the sheep, we started walking toward them. At our first approach, they took off. That was when I realized that I was not a know-it-all. I wasn't even able to figure out the "trick" through watching and learning from my own actions. I was the student looking to my 11-year-old teacher with a helpless expression. Emma's mother spent a lifetime breathing in and out the way to herd sheep. It's in her blood; it's like walking to her. Just like

speaking English is to me. I am the one who cannot walk into the middle of a herd of sheep and sit down, she is. I know now not to assume.

Gary's experiences on his classroom teacher's ranch afforded him a vastly different impression over what he had formulated at school, an impression he hoped was reciprocal:

I feel that I was invited into an important aspect of Tanya's life. Her cattle and horses are extremely hard work that need to be taken care of daily. I was able to see a part of her that I wasn't able to see in the classroom. I gained a deeper appreciation for her work ethic and determination. I believe that she also gained a better understanding of who I am. Although Tanya loves to tease and is opinionated, I think she witnessed my passion to learn new things. She realized that I am not only here to teach, but to actively take part in her culture, too.

Unlike most student teachers, Peggy recognized that the service she provided in helping a local family in caring for their livestock and with other chores was only short term:

Truthfully, tomorrow they will have to do it all over again. However, for the moment, we were helping out, and maybe because of us, that day was a bit easier for them. I know that they work hard to live in a modern world and to keep up traditional values at the same time. It is almost as though they work extra hard because of this.

Great Acceptance in the Community

The student teachers also believed that their service learning efforts resulted in greater acceptance in their placement communities, as community members recognized their willingness to work and learn, regardless of the tasks at hand. For several student teachers, new friendships were forged that spanned the duration of their student teaching experiences and even beyond. In contributing to the funeral reception for their school's bus driver, both Maggie and Rachel reflected on the sense of belonging that followed this significant community gathering. Rachel realized that one of the other volunteers working in the kitchen that day lived right behind their dorm apartment, and she enjoyed the new connections that resulted with this woman and her family. "However trivial this all may seem, it makes me feel more welcome to have another friend at school and neighbors to say hello to," Rachel reflected. "This makes my experience on the Reservation feel more complete; I feel less an outsider and more like a member of the community." Maggie, too, observed that many parents noted her involvement at the reception. "There have been several instances when I was at the post office or the trading post, and people would say, 'I saw

you helping at the funeral.’ I realized what a positive impact my presence there had on my acceptance in the community.”

Similarly, Julie and Miranda each experienced acceptance in their own ways, following the evening they spent with Laverne, the teacher aide whose daughter had attempted suicide. Miranda observed that Laverne was “friendlier than ever” at school, and suggested that she and Julie had been “promoted from student teachers to friends in her eyes.” Miranda also recognized that the playful remarks made by other teachers at school signaled acceptance:

They have made teasing comments about how much they like fried chicken or how they are almost out of dog food and why don’t we come over. People seem to like that we spent our time and energy on a member of the community in the way we did.

Julie, too, reported feeling more connected to Laverne, adding that at school, “she always mentions something to me about her dogs or her life at home, which has special meaning to me. Our relationship has crossed the boundaries of cultural difference, and I value it every day.”

For Leana, not only helping at the Blessingway ceremony, but the countless ways in which she contributed to her school’s academic, extracurricular, and residential programs, led to acceptance in profoundly meaningful ways:

Several of the staff have taken us under their wing. They offer advice, direction, reflection, and companionship. Perhaps they sense our desire to learn and understand the people in our host community. As time passes, they, too, want to know more about our traditions and us. Last night, I was asked to share my [Jewish] tradition’s philosophies on life, language, and prayer. I was delighted! To care enough or be curious enough about someone else’s traditions and philosophy and offer rapt attention during the discussion heightened my sense of inclusion in [this place].

Leana’s placement partner, Tom, echoed her feelings. In reflecting on his role in the Blessingway ceremony, he wrote, “I realized that I am part of this community. This makes my imminent departure more difficult, but the memories that much more pleasant.” Rachel perhaps offered the most insightful reflection on service, learning, and acceptance in her Reservation community:

Through all of my experiences on the Reservation and this one in particular, it has become increasingly evident that it really does take a while to be let into people’s lives. I learned that in order to be let in at all, you have to make a conscious effort to show people who you are and why you are there through active involvement in the community. You must demonstrate your intentions through direct action.

New Insights of a Personal Nature

For some student teachers, their service learning projects resulted in important personal insights as they were challenged by new experiences, often well outside of their comfort zones. Kathleen, for example, offered to help out at a Hawaiian-themed birthday party that one of the cafeteria workers was throwing for her daughter and grandson. In reflecting on the personal impact of the experience, she described it as “profound,” adding:

...it put me in the situation of being the racial minority. I had not been in this position before, especially at a social gathering. I was really sensitive to how people looked at me, whether or not they were talking about me, and whether or not I was going to do something stupid. For a while after guests arrived, I felt uncomfortable. However, I was equally aware of people welcoming me, reaching out to me, and wanting to talk to me. It made me realize how important it is to always make people feel welcome and to behave kindly toward others, which I think I always do, but in certain cases such as this, it is extra important.

Gary, who had helped his classroom teacher and her husband on their ranch, believed he had become a stronger person for placing himself in unfamiliar surroundings and successfully fulfilling the requirements of his service activities. “Most people could not take themselves away from their comfortable circle of life,” he reflected. “The participants of the Reservation Project are special because we have a deep, unexplainable sensation that drives us to new experiences.”

Unfortunately, not every student teacher in the Reservation Project is as open to change and differences as Gary would like to believe. Joann, for example, who, with her placement partner, had helped a community member in collecting firewood to use in a sweat, felt that their efforts were not sufficiently recognized and acknowledged. “He did not show a lot of appreciation for us,” she wrote, “which was frustrating because we drove all over to help him find firewood. Not only did we drive everywhere, but our car is now filthy from the inside and out because of the dirt roads and firewood.”

Thankfully, superficial reflections such as these are relatively rare, perhaps because the student teachers’ commitment to living and working on the Reservation and their preparation leading up to the experience have spanned such a long period of time. They had explored multiple historical and contemporary contexts, and had examined the similarities and differences between their largely mainstream culture and that of the Navajos. While serving food at Mr. Charley’s funeral reception, Rachel grappled personally with her own whiteness, drawing on what she had read as a scholar and felt as a human being:

Almost all of the guests, in particular the family members, said thank you to each server individually as they went through the line. Mrs. Charley even gave each of us a hug to show her gratitude for our efforts. Except for her, whose thank you was so sincere that I almost cried, these interactions made me somewhat uncomfortable, although I am not sure exactly why. I have two theories, one of which is that it is not common in mainstream American culture to go out of your way to thank cafeteria workers or other people in menial positions. My other theory is that as the guest looked into my comparatively light brown eyes and saw my white skin, I felt that they should not have to thank me. While this experience had no resemblance to any major historical event, I felt like it was a confrontation with history. Here I was, one of two Anglos among a completely Navajo crowd, attempting to create a sense of amity between the Anglo and Navajo communities, a goal that has been consistently attempted and easily forgotten throughout history. And my ultimately insignificant presence as a volunteer at this community event could not possibly achieve such a lofty goal.

The depth to which Rachel took her personal insights through her service and learning at the funeral reception stands in sharp contrast to Joann's complaining about a vehicle made dirty by firewood and dirt roads.

Renewed Vision of a Student Teacher's Role on the Reservation

Finally, for many student teachers, their service learning activities helped them clarify their role on the Navajo Reservation. Yes, they were there to teach, but what else? For some, they embraced opportunities to continue serving in a variety of ways. Alli, for example, had exercised and cared for the horses belonging to the elderly uncle of a local councilman, a service she provided for this gentleman several times during her experience on the Reservation. Her sustained interest in helping led to further activities with others in her placement community:

To name a few, I typed all of the school board inventory reports for the kitchen staff, I sat on two committees to make and revise school policies and grant proposals, and I attended chapter meetings and church services where I was greeted with familiar smiles.

For Rachel, it was the unexpected discovery of being a good listener. "It seems that people here enjoy talking and telling stories about their lives, much more so than I ever expected," she considered. "Sometimes I think that some people just need someone to listen, and as a participant in the Reservation Project, I feel that this is one of my biggest roles. Furthermore, I think I will

learn the most by simply listening to what the Navajo people have to say.” Leana, on the other hand, valued the freedom to assume a great many roles in her placement community:

We are free to interact with the students and adults in a number of ways and a variety of settings. We routinely serve meals and tutor students. As able, we chaperone dances and other events, play sports, sponsor movie nights, and just “play” with the kids. While this leads to feeling stretched regarding our personal time, the rewards are countless. We are able to know the students inside and outside the school. It offers us a perspective most teachers cannot have. What a gift.

Conclusion

The Reservation Project participants whose service learning projects are described here have demonstrated, through their activities and words, that the inclusion of such assignments in the student teaching semester adds a dimension that goes well beyond the usual focus of school-based experiences. These student teachers have engaged in activities they might never have tried otherwise, met and worked with groups of people they might have overlooked or avoided, and made new discoveries about their communities and about themselves they might never have otherwise. In taking giant steps outside of their comfort zones and making themselves vulnerable, they have been rewarded with knowledge and insights, and most important, acceptance by Navajo women, men, and children in their homes and communities. Certainly, for perhaps the majority of mainstream Americans, such opportunities are indeed rare; for these beginning educators, the lessons learned are priceless.

Gilliland (1995) observed,

Too many teachers, when they do venture into the community, hide behind a veneer of academic aloofness. Hesitating to make themselves vulnerable, they refuse to admit that they do not know what they need to learn. They believe their educational facade will gain them respect. Not in an indigenous community. (p. 22)

Carol, who had helped construct the sweat lodge in preparation for the ceremony to pray for the missing soldier, understood exactly this. Participating in this event strengthened her bond with Robert’s family in a way she never could have anticipated. “To become fully accepted by the family, we had to demonstrate sensitivity and interest in their traditions,” she explained. “Some Navajo people we meet are at first intimidated and suspicious of us because we come from different cultural and economic backgrounds. Participating in a situation where our college degrees could offer us no advantage may have helped the

family feel more comfortable with us.” That Carol, as well as other students whose stories are shared here, remained on the Reservation to teach following the conclusion of her student teaching suggests that she internalized these lessons as fully as we ever could have hoped for.

For student teachers in the American Indian Reservation Project, service learning projects also go beyond what Kenny, Simon, Kiley-Brabeck, and Lerner (2002) and Wade (1997) described as the academic and community service goals of such projects. Through their service learning projects, student teachers also learned more about their position in and knowledge of the community, leading to moments of humility in the face of what they did not yet understand about their new environment, as well as satisfaction at having taken the first step toward a more complete comprehension of the local community.

Now, plans are being developed to investigate the long-term impact on elementary and secondary classroom teachers who participated in the Reservation Project three or more years prior, to begin to understand the ways in which their Reservation student teaching and community involvement experiences continue to influence their professional and personal lives. For example, whereas the service learning project represented a significant, required component while they were on the Navajo Reservation, is service to the school’s community, regardless of where they are teaching, something that continues to influence and define their lives? It would be interesting and valuable to understand the far-reaching effects of such requirements on the student teachers who had embraced them so fully at the time they were on-site.

The service learning project is designed to take student teachers *out* of their relatively cloistered school communities and *into* the wider, local communities in which they—and their pupils—work and live. However, service learning need not be linked to student teaching only when placements are made in distant and unfamiliar surroundings. Knowledge of the community and the people who live there, including their backgrounds, beliefs, traditions, and values, can create a richer classroom context in which teachers can better serve their elementary and secondary pupils *anywhere*.

References

- Brown, S. C., & Kysilka, M. L. (2002). *Applying multicultural and global concepts in the classroom and beyond*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Fedullo, M. (1992). *Light of the feather: Pathways through contemporary Indian America*. New York: Morrow.
- Gilliland, H. (1995). *Teaching the Native American* (3rd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Kenny, M. E., Simon, L. A. K., Kiley-Brabeck, K., & Lerner, R., Eds. (2002). *Learning to serve: Promoting civil society through service learning*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

- McCarty, T. (1989). School as community: The Rough Rock demonstration. *Harvard Educational Review*, 59(4), 484-503.
- McGee Banks, C. A. (2004). Communities, families, and educators working for school improvement. In J. A. Banks & C. A. McGee Banks (Eds.), *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (5th ed., pp. 421-442). New York: Wiley.
- Ramírez, L., & Gallardo, O. M. (2001). *Portraits of teachers in multicultural settings: A critical literacy approach*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Rhodes, R. W. (1994). *Nurturing learning in Native American students*. Hotevilla, AZ: Sonwai Books.
- Roessel, R. (2003). *Navajo school administrator's program, brief description*. Unpublished manuscript, Rough Rock, Arizona.
- Silcox, H. (1993). *A how-to guide to reflection: Adding cognitive learning to community service programs*. Holland, PA: Brighton Press.
- Stachowski, L. L., & Frey, C. J. (2003). Lessons learned in Navajoland: Student teachers reflect on professional and cultural learning in reservation schools and communities. *Action in Teacher Education*, 25(3), 38-47.
- Stachowski, L. L., & Mahan, J. M. (1998). Cross-cultural field placements: Student teachers learning from schools and communities. *Theory Into Practice*, 37(2), 155-162.
- Stachowski, L. L., Richardson, J. W., & Henderson, M. (2003.) Student teachers report on the influence of cultural values on their classroom practice and community involvement: Perspectives from the Navajo Reservation and abroad. *The Teacher Educator*, 39(1), 52-63.
- Stachowski, L. L., & Visconti, V. (1998). Service learning in overseas nations: U.S. student teachers give, grow, and gain outside the classroom. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 49(3), 212-219.
- Wade, R. C., Ed. (1997). *Community service-learning: A guide to including service in the public school curriculum*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Laura L. Stachowski is a professor in Curriculum and Instruction and the Office of Teacher Education at Indiana University-Bloomington. She is the director of the Cultural Immersion Projects, through which student teachers can participate in the American Indian Reservation Project (school/community placements on the Navajo Reservation in New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah) or the Overseas Project (school/community placements in Australia, China, Costa Rica, England, India, Ireland, Kenya, New Zealand, Russia, Scotland, Spain, and Wales). She may be contacted at Indiana University, Wright Education Building, Room 1044, 201 N. Rose Ave., Bloomington, IN, 47405-1006

Christopher Frey is a graduate student in Education Policy Studies and East Asian Studies at Indiana University-Bloomington. He was an associate instructor for three years in the Cultural Projects office, working with student teachers in both the American Indian Reservation Project and Overseas Project. He is currently at Hokkaido University in Japan on a Japanese Ministry of Education fellowship, researching nineteenth-century schools and education policy for the indigenous Ainu.